Medical
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CONTENTS

FIRST PART—OCTOBER 1941

PAGE

A biographical sketch of his career. By J. T. Wilson 1

A presomite human embryo (Shaw) with primitive streak and chorda canal, with special reference to the development of the vascular system. By R. J. Gladstone and W. J. Hamilton 9

A comparative study of the inferior tibio-fibular joint. By Alice Carleton . 45

The capillary bed of the central nervous system in a member of a second genus of Gymnophiona—*Siphonops*. By E. Horne Craigie 56

The early stages in the degeneration of cutaneous nerve fibres. By G. Weddell and P. Glees 65

Variations in organ size caused by chronic treatment with adrenal cortical compounds. An example of a dissociated adaptation to a hormone. By H. Selye 94

Observations on the cardio-vascular system and lungs of an African elephant foetus. By E. C. Amoroso, K. J. Franklin and M. M. L. Prichard . 100

The development and significance of the cell columns in the ventral horn of the cervical and upper thoracic spinal cord of the rabbit. By G. J. Romanes . 112

The lateral geniculate body in the platyrrhine monkeys. By W. E. Le Gros Clark 131

Review. A bibliography of human morphology. By W. M. Krogman . . 141

SECOND PART—JANUARY 1942

The degeneration and re-innervation of grafted nerves. By F. K. Sanders and J. Z. Young 143

Observations on Jacobson's organ and its innervation in *Vipera berus*. By A. Bellairs 167

The existence of microglia in the neurohypophysis. By E. Vazquez-Lopez . 178

A presomite human embryo (Shaw): the implantation. By W. J. Hamilton and R. J. Gladstone 187

Living eggs of the golden hamster (*Cricetus auratus*). By D. M. Samuel and W. J. Hamilton 204

The effect of the method of administration on the morphogenetic actions of progesterone. By Helen Winter 209

Enterectomy and the blood lymphocytes. By J. M. Yoffey 214

Proceedings 221

THIRD PART—APRIL 1942

PAGE

The role of mechanical stresses in bone formation in vitro. By A. Glucksmann 231

The bifurcation of the posterior caval channel in the eutherian foetal heart. By E. C. Amoroso, A. E. Barclay, K. J. Franklin and M. M. L. Prichard 240

The nerve supply of the branchial arch arteries in *Vipera berus*. By J. D. Boyd 248

Matrices of the facialis musculature: homologization of the musculature in monotremes with that of marsupials and placentals. By G. S. Lightoller 258

The tetrapod knee joint. By R. Wheeler Haines 270

Thalamo-frontal projection in man. By K. Stern 302

The hind foot of *Youngina* and fifth metatarsal in reptilia. By E. S. Goodrich 308

The termination of optic fibres in the lateral geniculate body of the rabbit. By P. Glees 313

In Memoriam:
James Hugo Gray, 1909–1941 319

FOURTH PART—JULY 1942

The blood supply of nerves. I. Historical review. By W. E. Adams . . 323

Age and sex variations in the fat of the adrenal cortex of the white rat. By C. E. Tobin and Raymond Whitehead 342

Vascularization in the brains of reptiles. IV. Quantitative studies in the American alligator. By E. Horne Craigie 347

The mid-dorsal hair whorl in an Australian of European ancestry. By F. Fenner 356

Specialized conducting tissue in the heart of the golden hamster (*Cricetus auratus*). By E. W. Walls 359

The cells of Meynert in the visual cortex of the monkey. By W. E. Le Gros Clark 369

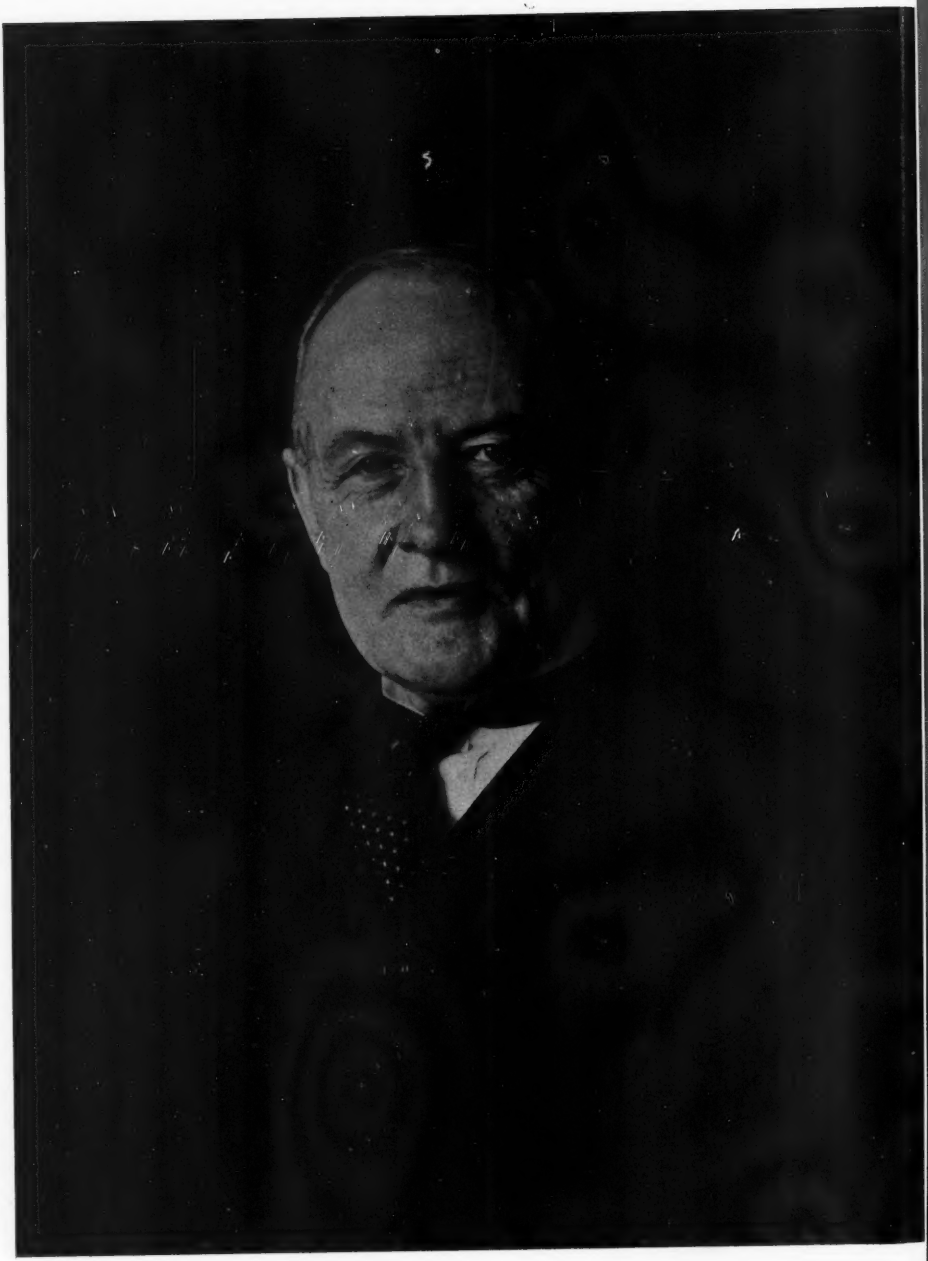
The early development of the goat (*Capra hircus*). By E. C. Amoroso, W. F. B. Griffiths and W. J. Hamilton 377

Reviews. The principles of anatomy as seen in the hand. By Frederic Wood Jones 407

Functional neuroanatomy. By W. J. S. Krieg 408

Lymphatics, lymph and lymphoid tissue. By C. K. Drinker and J. M. Yoffey 409

Bibliographia Primatologica. A classified bibliography of primates other than man. Part I. By Theodore C. Ruch 410



J. T. Wilson

UNIV. OF MICH.

THE

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IS DEDICATED TO

JAMES THOMAS WILSON

J. T. WILSON

M.A. (CANTAB.), M.B., C.M. (EDIN.), LL.D. (EDIN.), F.Z.S., F.R.S.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF HIS CAREER

On the 14th of April of this year, Professor J. T. Wilson, Past President and senior member of the Anatomical Society, celebrated the anniversary of his 80th birthday. To commemorate this memorable occasion and as a token of the high esteem and affectionate regard in which he is held by his fellow-members, and in recognition, moreover, of his life-long devotion to the advancement of anatomical science and of his services in the conduct of the affairs of the Society, the Editorial Committee, in the name of the Society, have dedicated to him this volume of the *Journal of Anatomy*.

James Thomas Wilson was born on the 14th of April, 1861, at Moniaive, a village in Dumfriesshire, where his father was schoolmaster, and from him he received his early education. As a boy, he acquired an interest in the Natural Sciences, partly through his father who was a keen astronomer with a telescope of his own, partly through contact with his father's friend, Dr Grierson, a remarkable, rather eccentric man, who was the doctor in the neighbouring village of Thornhill and an authority on the local fauna and flora as well as on the antiquities of the district, and founder of the museum there which bears his name.

In due course, young Wilson passed the Preliminary Examination for entrance to the University. He went up to Edinburgh in 1879 where he matriculated at the age of eighteen and entered the Medical School, though at the time he was more attracted to the Natural Sciences than to Medicine.

His teachers in the Medical Faculty included such well-known men as W. Turner (Anatomy), W. Rutherford (Physiology), T. R. Fraser (Materia Medica), W. S. Greenfield (Pathology), and in the later clinical years, Professors Grainger-Stewart, Annandale, Simpson and Douglas Maclagan. Among his contemporaries were his friend and classmate J. S. Haldane, and his future brother-in-law, J. Lorrain Smith. Both of these young men were keen students of philosophy and both of them remained his life-long friends. From them he too acquired a deep-rooted interest in the problems of philosophy which he has never lost and which has contributed in no small measure to that broad outlook on men and affairs which is one of his most striking characteristics.

He duly completed his medical examinations, having succeeded in annexing only one medal during his course (so he avers) and that in Botany, and on 1 August 1883 at the age of 22, he graduated M.B., C.M. with 2nd Class Honours. It is of interest to record (and surely the record is unique) that,

among those who graduated on the same day as J. T. Wilson, were two men, A. Melville Paterson and Arthur Robinson, who, like him, were destined to occupy Chairs of Anatomy and to become Presidents of the Anatomical Society. The next winter session he spent at the Royal Infirmary as Resident House-Surgeon under Dr John Duncan of whom he was an enthusiastic disciple. He had attended his extra-mural class of Surgery, and had won his prize, and if he had followed his advice, might well have found a career in Surgery. Instead, and as a means of seeing something of the outside world and at the same time of increasing his financial resources, he signed on as surgeon on a cargo-boat trading to the East. For a year he braved the perils of the China Seas and read Philosophy! On his return to Edinburgh he was appointed Demonstrator of Anatomy by Professor Turner, and acted in this capacity during the winter session 1885–6 and for the first half of the succeeding session. Then set in the tide in his affairs which opened up the promise of a career in Anatomy. In the latter half of 1886 he received from Professor T. P. Anderson Stuart the offer of the post of Demonstrator of Anatomy in the Medical School of the University of Sydney. Anderson Stuart had been Demonstrator of Physiology when Wilson was a student, and in 1882 had gone out to the newly established Medical School there as Professor of Physiology and Anatomy. After consulting his Chief, Professor Turner, Wilson accepted the offer. The salary, though not large, was princely compared with the pittance the Edinburgh Demonstrator received in those days directly from the Professor, and the prospects appeared good. He arrived in Sydney in the early part of 1887 along with Professor M. W. MacCallum (now Sir Mungo), who had been appointed to the Chair of English, and the friendship they then established has lasted until the present day.

We have no record of Wilson's reactions when he first saw the Medical School for it was far from being impressive, having started its existence some five years before as a four-roomed weather-board building with a handful of students. However, Anderson Stuart was a man of great energy, determination and far-sighted vision, and as the number of students was gradually increasing he induced the N.S.W. Government to provide the funds necessary for the building and equipment of a new School. It was planned on generous lines in conformity with the stately main University building, alongside which it was to stand, and, when Wilson arrived, its walls were rising and it was completed during the next two years.

The time was now ripe for the splitting of the Chair held by Anderson Stuart, and in 1890 a new Chair in Anatomy, endowed from the Challis bequest, was instituted and Wilson was appointed first Challis Professor of Anatomy at the comparatively early age of 29, Johnson Symington and St John Brooks being among the candidates. In the same year he was elected a member of the Anatomical Society and so became its first overseas member. In the new School, the Department of Anatomy occupied a series of spacious rooms on the first floor, with its Museum on the ground-floor. Thanks to the wide outlook and organizing ability of the new Professor, it was, in its equipment

and facilities for teaching and research, far in advance of any comparable Department in this country at the time.

The years that followed were for Wilson years of high endeavour and great achievement. In 1891, C. J. Martin (now Sir Charles) arrived in Sydney as Demonstrator of Physiology in succession to Almroth Wright. He proved a tower of strength to the new School and was soon collaborating with Wilson in investigations on the anatomy of the snout of *Platypus* and on the peculiar tactile organs that occur in the skin of the bill. The present writer, then a raw callow youth, reached Sydney in 1892 to take up the Demonstratorship in Biology, and with the encouragement and generous help afforded him by these two men (for which he will ever be grateful) he too, in the course of a year or two, was enabled to participate in the team-work. Then in 1894, G. Elliot Smith was invited by Professor Wilson, as he himself has related,* to join the staff as Demonstrator of Anatomy, and he was soon hard at work dissecting monotreme and marsupial brains and laying the foundations of his future career in neurological research. Amongst other workers in the laboratories in these early days may be mentioned F. Tidswell, who worked with Martin on the structure and physiology of the femoral gland of the monotremes, and W. J. S. McKay, a former pupil, who collaborated with Wilson in work on the monotreme scapula and provided a detailed account of the musculature of the shoulder-girdle.

These were days of intensive activity, often prolonged far into the night, and relieved during vacations by camping expeditions into the wilds in search of monotreme and marsupial material.

During the ensuing years, Professor Wilson's colleagues in the University came to rely more and more on his sound judgement and wide outlook on University affairs, while his reputation as an anatomist steadily increased. In 1909, much to the joy of his friends, his research work received its due recognition by his election into the Fellowship of the Royal Society.

With his high sense of public duty and in a circumscribed community like that of Sydney, it was inevitable, as time went on, that more and more burdens of administrative work, University and other, should be thrust upon him. These extra duties he bore cheerfully and executed with Wilsonian thoroughness. Amongst the many positions he occupied it may be recorded that he acted for ten years as a Director of the Prince Alfred Hospital and as its Secretary for three years. He was President of the Linnean Society of N.S.W. in 1898 and 1899, a Trustee of the Australian Museum, Chairman of the Professorial Board of the University of Sydney for two four-year periods, a Fellow of the University Senate and Acting Dean and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine. Moreover, he took an active part in military affairs, an interest which dated from his Edinburgh days when he was a member of the University Volunteers. For nine years he held commissioned rank in the N.S.W. Scottish Rifles (later, 5th Infantry Regt. C.M.F.), ending up as Major and second in

* *Journ. Anat.* LXXI, 1936. Obit. Not. *Roy. Soc.* no. 6, vol. 2, 1938.

command of the battalion. From 1907 to 1912 he was in command, first as Major and then as Lieut.-Colonel, of the Australian Intelligence Corps, 2nd Military District, while in 1914, on the outbreak of the Great War, he was called up to organize the N.S.W. branch of the Censorship and was promoted Hon. Colonel in 1915. In the same year he was appointed Chairman of the N.S.W. branch of Commonwealth War Propaganda.

In 1920, Professor Wilson had to make what must have been one of the most difficult decisions of his life. In that year the Chair of Anatomy at Cambridge became vacant through the death of Professor Alexander MacAlister, and his many friends on this side urged him to allow his name to be submitted to the Board of Electors. He might well have declined, for he had spent thirty-three years of his life in Sydney and was deeply attached to his adopted country by strong family ties and many bonds of friendship. Moreover, he had built up a flourishing Department, he had been elected Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, and he commanded the trust and esteem of all members of the University so that his elevation to the highest administrative office the University had to offer seemed only a question of time. It must have been for him no easy decision, but what his friend Sir Mungo MacCallum has termed his 'practical idealism' enabled him to put these personal considerations on one side. He allowed his name to go forward and he was duly elected. With amazing fortitude, he pulled up his roots and returned to the Motherland. The present writer has reason to believe that he has never regretted the choice he then made.

The outstanding service he rendered to Anatomy and to Cambridge during his tenure of the Chair is known to all members of the Society. With characteristic energy and in the face of great inherent difficulties, he set about the reorganization of the old Department there, and within a remarkably short space of time he had created what amounted to a new Anatomy School, fully staffed and adequately equipped and provided with an excellent library enriched by many of his own books, periodicals and reprints. On the teaching side he instituted most efficient instructional courses to meet the needs of the large number of students who at that time took Anatomy as one of their subjects in Part I of the Tripos examinations, and such was the effect of his teaching that each year a small group of men elected to take Anatomy, never a popular subject, for Part II of the same examination. These men were fortunate, for to them Professor Wilson, as ever, gave of his best.

With his scientific work in Sydney and Cambridge it is not necessary to deal here in any detail. We need only recall his observations, with C. J. Martin, on the anatomy of the muzzle of *Ornithorhynchus* and on the peculiar rod-like tactile organs which occur in the skin of the 'bill', and their further observations on the same, in which the strictures of Professor E. B. Poulton are adequately dealt with; his important paper on the morphology of the 'dumb-bell' bone in *Platypus*; his illuminating discussion with W. J. S. MacKay on the question of the homologies of the surfaces and borders of the

monotreme scapula; his description of the musculature of the fore-limb of the marsupial mole, *Notoryctes*, a model of its kind; his papers with the present writer on the development and succession of the teeth in *Perameles* and on the development of *Ornithorhynchus*; his important contribution to our knowledge of early human embryos; and, in more recent years, his penetrating critique on the development of *Cavia* and his conclusive observations on the true nature of the foramen of Majendie.

Professor Wilson has always been keenly interested in laboratory work and methods of technique, and nothing gave him greater pleasure than the doing of things with his own hands in the laboratory. As a result he has himself devised new methods as well as improvements in apparatus, some of which he has demonstrated before the Society. He is, moreover, a highly expert photographer, and is skilled in the use of tools.

During the years 1922–4, he acted as President of the Society, and by his charm of manner and urbanity, no less than by his learning, worthily upheld the high traditions of that office. It is deserving of record that the summer meeting held at Cambridge during his Presidency, and at his invitation, was one of the most successful ever held by the Society.

His Alma Mater in 1926 did him honour by conferring on him the honorary degree of LL.D.

After a full life of strenuous activity and manifold achievement in the service of Anatomy and of his fellows, and held in high honour and esteem by his colleagues and fellow-members of the Anatomical Society, Professor Wilson retired from his Chair in 1934.

Now in his 81st year, his fellow-members rejoice that he retains unimpaired his old interests and his bodily and mental vigour and they would wish him many more years of health and happy and peaceful retirement.

The foregoing record conveys but an inkling of the many-sided character of this great-minded and lovable man, and something more remains to be said. His old friend, Sir Mungo MacCallum, in an appreciation which appeared in 1920, when he was on the eve of leaving Sydney, wrote of him as follows: 'It has been said that the truly cultured man ought to know everything of something and something of everything: and few have approximated more nearly to that impossible definition than Professor Wilson. We have in his recent appointment [to Cambridge] unimpeachable testimony that he knows a good deal of his own particular branch; specialists in many other branches have found that he knows a good deal of theirs as well. He has an appreciative acquaintance with good literature; he is all but a professional student of philosophy; he is not indifferent to educational theory; he has occupied himself with the enigmas of primeval history; he is not unfamiliar with the processes and results of biblical criticism' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 1920).

With such a breadth of outlook, and always actuated by the loftiest ideals, it is no wonder that Professor Wilson exercised a profound influence on the

generations of students who passed through his hands. He was indeed a great and inspiring teacher. Under him students could hardly fail to acquire a knowledge of the essentials of human anatomy, but as Sir Mungo MacCallum has remarked, 'not a few of them declare that their obligations to him are far deeper and that the spirit of his teaching has helped them to realize the ethics of their profession, its dignity, its responsibility, its value for the service of men'. The present writer has yet to meet an old pupil of Wilson's who has failed to speak of 'Jummy', as the irreverent Australian student was wont to call him, in terms other than those of the deepest gratitude and respect. Many of his old students, both in Sydney and Cambridge, have made good in anatomical research, and occupy, or have occupied, important teaching posts in Anatomy. The record includes the names of the late J. Froude Flashman, the late John I. Hunter, the late Grafton Elliot Smith, A. N. Burkitt, R. A. Dart, W. A. Fell, Una Fielding, F. Goldby, H. L. H. H. Green, G. H. S. Lightoller, F. P. Sandes, S. A. Smith, and J. S. Shellshear.

No one who has read Professor Wilson's papers or heard him speak can fail to be impressed by his gift of lucid expression, by his breadth of view, by his complete grasp of the essentials of the subject in hand, and by his capacity for critical and balanced judgement. At times, especially in debate, he may seem to be expressing his views in the most uncompromising fashion, but that is only a Wilsonian mannerism, a relic perhaps of his ancestry and upbringing. In reality, he is never one-sided or partisan in his judgements and is quite open to argument, though a difficult man to argue with or to convince since his own views have been reached only after mature consideration of all the available evidence. The present writer speaks from dire experience, for the story used to be current in Sydney that when Professor Wilson and he were at work together, the voice of one of them could be heard declaiming over a radius of at least a quarter of a mile!

I feel I cannot conclude this wholly inadequate sketch of my old friend without acknowledging the debt I myself owe him for the encouragement, help and inspiration I have received from him and for the friendship he has accorded me, over a period now bordering on fifty years.

J. P. H.

The photograph is by Mr F. J. Pittock, F.R.P.S., Dept. of Anatomy and Embryology, University College, London.